Why the Words We Say Matter

Description

Great communication plays a vital role in solving almost every problem in the workplace. How well leaders communicate has everything to do with how well employees engage in their work, how they take feedback, and whether or not they feel a sense of meaning and purpose. This type of communication is incredibly hard. It doesnâ??t come naturally to most.

Remember, in all communication, there is a sender and a receiver. Both are coming from different places with different points of view. And great communication is not just about people understanding what you are trying to say (although that is a big part of it). Itâ??s also about how people react to your words and how they feel about you afterward.

Great communicators are great influencers. They are powerful culture-builders. They are masters at managing relationships, attracting and retaining talent, and, ultimately, driving performance inside their organization.

This is why human potential developer Terre Shortâ??author of *The Words We Choose: Your Guide to How and Why Words Matter*â??says if we could just pay a little more attention to our words, we would greatly improve our self-awareness and build up our emotional intelligence. And we would absolutely transform our daily experiences.

Terre is scheduled to speak at EntreCon, our virtual business and leadership conference, to be held Wednesday and Thursday, November 18 and 19, 2020. So much of what she teaches resonates on a deep level, and Iâ??d like to share a few of her insights in this column. For example:

The voice is a choice. Terre says we all have a voice in our head. It tells the narrative that shapes our life. When that voice is negativeâ??cynical, complaining, angry, judging (of ourselves and others)â??we experience our life in a negative way. The good news is, we own the voice in our head. We can choose to believe the story the voice is telling (or not), and we can choose to change that story (or not). This starts with reflecting on the words we are currently choosing.

Our words need to align with our values. When we speak, we need to be careful that what weâ??re saying reflects what we feel in our heart. If our words donâ??t align with our values, we will find ourselves misunderstood and unable to make meaningful connections. Terre says that, surprisingly, many of us donâ??t even *know* our own values. If leaders are vague on their own values, they need to hold up the mirror and do some soul-searching.

Stifle the shoulds (and the canâ??ts and mustnâ??ts). When someone tells you that you â??shouldâ?• do something, ask the voice in your head, *Why?* and *What purpose does this serve?* This helps you get more in touch with your personal values and determine whether your next course of action is truly in line with the alleged â??rules.â?• Terre says that living by the rules of others can keep you from being true to yourself, inhibit your growth, and impact your relationships.

Self-deprecating humor is like the large bucket of popcorn at the movies. I loved this analogy. Terre says that self-deprecation is very satisfying for a while, until it is not. Your audience may appreciate it, but over time, it will take a toll on your self-worth.

Follow Grandmaâ??s Rule as often as possible. Grandmaâ??s Rule is â??If you donâ??t have anything nice to say, donâ??t say anything at all.â?• Terre ties this to managing up, which means sharing positive information about another person, place, or process. I have seen the power of managing up throughout my career. When we do this, we instill confidence and reduce anxiety in customers, and it makes employees feel good about working there.

Choose words that model being of service. Terreâ??s example of the phrase â??no problemâ?• is interesting. She notes that over the past couple of decades, it has been very popular to say â??no problemâ?• to a customerâ??s request. Yet â??no problemâ?• implies that there *may* have been a problem and the request narrowly escaped being burdensome. Itâ??s better to say â??my pleasureâ?• or â??Iâ??d be happy to.â?• This leaves the customer feeling that it was okay to make the request.

Say â??I get toâ?• rather than â??I have to.â?• One example Terre uses is a nurse who says, â??I have to care for Mrs. Klein today.â?• But when Mrs. Klein overhears this, how does she feel? She might feel like she is a burden. We want our customers to feel that it is a privilege to serve them. And we want our employees to feel that it is a privilege to do the work we are doing together. Saying â??I get toâ?• or â??We get toâ?• sets the right context for the communication.

Know when to use â??I,â?• â??we,â?• and â??they.â?• Use â??Iâ?• when you are representing how you feel, particularly if there is a conflict or if you require clarity. In referring to a team, try to avoid the use of â??they.â?• It can lead to a we/they culture, which can lead to blaming. When speaking on behalf of the team, use â??we.â?•

Choose silence more often. Often, saying nothing is more powerful than saying something. Terre says itâ??s good to choose silence when our presence is more important than our words, when weâ??re truly listening, and when we have no words to serve the other (such as when someone is grieving a loss).

Donâ??t just send thank-you notes; send love notes. Iâ??ve always been an advocate of thank-you notes. They are extremely powerful. But Terre says to go a step further and send â??love notes.â?• She says she coached an individual who would send notes to her kids thanking them for â??sharing herâ?• and telling them great things about the work she does. This is a love note, and itâ??s an act of

kindness that can last forever.

These are just a few of Terreâ??s insights. Her book is a great reminder of how complex and powerful communication really is. The words we think and say truly create the world we live in. As leaders, these words create the organizations we leadâ??and those organizations and the people who work there make up our communities, our nation, and our world.

Our communication skills are too important to be left to chance. We all need to become aware of why we say the words we say, and to get intentional about choosing better ones. We all need to hold up the mirror. This may require reading, training, and coaching. I have seen it over and over: Becoming a better, stronger, kinder, more influential person starts with the words we say. We owe it to the people we lead, live with, and love to choose them more carefully.

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